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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Rainer Hampp Verlag

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sobottka, E., Eggert, E., & Streck, D. R. (2005). Research as political-pedagogical mediation. Reflections based on the Participatory Budget. *International Journal of Action Research*, 1(1), 69-86. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-356816>

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Research as political-pedagogical mediation. Reflections based on the Participatory Budget

Emil Sobottka
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This article analyzes research as political-pedagogical mediation in constituting citizenship, having as a reference the Participatory Budget process of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil). It verifies how, through a participative methodology, the researcher is challenged to reposition him or herself and the process of production of knowledge in the context of social change.

Key words: Research, participation, social change

Introduction

Social research has frequently been the object of reflections and discussions about its capacity to produce knowledge that is adequate for the social reality which is being researched. Criticisms and proposals, especially in the areas of methodology and epistemology, have led to a diversity and a technical refinement of the set of instruments available today to the social researcher, from which she or he can choose according to their objects of research, their goals or their preferences.

The criticisms also made it possible to hear other voices that were not being contemplated in the research, or that did not feel the effects of this research in their daily lives. The debates on relevance and rigorousness, which

are at the center of the so-called “war of the sciences”¹ are an expression of this quest for alternatives. Latin America was a fertile field of intellectual production made, initially, at the margins of classical academic rigor. Many foundational ideas of popular education, theology of liberation and other social sciences were originally disseminated in “smaller” publications and were later incorporated into the academic world.² In education, the most typical example of this is Paulo Freire whose texts were never easily incorporated in the academic canons.

Participatory research and popular education were based on the principle that, just as there does not exist a vacuum of power, there also does not exist a vacuum of knowledge and culture. What exists is the non-recognition of the knowledge of the marginalized groups as legitimate knowledge within that which has been recognized as science or knowledge. Science is produced in the north and in the center: in the south and on the peripheries there exists common sense, ideologies, superstition and beliefs. Science, an academic procedure, produces knowledge; the people deal with practical wisdom. The discourse of transferring technologies favoring development, promulgated by the research centers and by the financing agencies is still strongly based on this premise of irradiation of knowledge. On the contrary, the idea that pulsates throughout popular education and participatory research since the decade of the sixties, get to know by transforming, emphasized that there was a commitment to investigate in order to change the social reality, or more precisely, to change social reality while investigating.

The principle of the process of getting to know as a possibility for transformation is only able to be carried out if there is actual participation in a specific reality. And this participation was “the most central and most polemical aspect, together with the proposal of social transformation, as central characteristics of participatory research” (Silva 1986, 142). Participation and transformation were ideas that were constantly affirmed by the authors in-

¹ The debate of the “war of the sciences” gyrates basically around the nature and the validity of the knowledge that produces and legitimizes the changes (Santos 2004).

² This quest can also be verified on other continents. For an analysis of the movement in India see Shiv Sisvanathan: *Convite para uma guerra das ciências* (Invitation to a war of the sciences) (In: Santos 2004, 757-776).

volved in the proposal for participatory research, but it seems that they remained stopped in time. One has the impression that this debate, which was established more emphatically in the decade of the eighties, remained in some way frozen (Fals Borda 1981; Brandão 1981, 1984; Gajardo 1986; Silva 1986). In a very special way education made no major movements for this methodological debate to advance.

Today, based on experiences that were conducted throughout the decade of the nineties in municipalities that had administrations which were generally articulated to the left, researchers once more assume the language, creating other categories and postures. Furthermore, the people who researched and wrote with this focus of participatory research in the prior decades, today are advisors in the public processes of participative planning and administration, revealing the vitality of this practice and of these ideas. Participation and transformation are once again an integral part of the activities of those who research, and the production of knowledge by the central protagonists of the social processes is once again recognized in the academic world.

The experience of the research carried out through the direct participation in contexts of the involvement of citizens in public policies, especially in the Participative Budget Process of the state of Rio Grande do Sul between 1999 and 2002, has confronted us with the question of the place of research, and of the researchers, in the social processes, when concrete demands of the population or wide ranging social change are at play. Our proposal is that social research can occupy an important and complex place as political-pedagogical mediation amongst all the participants of the formulation and implementation of public policies.

This proposal will be developed in four argumentative steps, each one of them forming one section of this current text. First, the tight link between the emergence of systematic social research and the periods of wide ranging social transformations and the implantation of public social policies will be evoked. Specifically for participatory research, this contextual link reveals itself as decisive, from its origins in the popular cultural movements, to its current practice in the interface with social movements. With the help of the conceptualization of mediation between theory and praxis elaborated by Habermas, it will be possible to raise for discussion the claims to academic

legitimacy of this type of research. Finally, participatory research takes on its delicate insertion in the contexts of political disputes, which is an invitation to distinguish it from other forms of appropriation of knowledge generated by social research.

Research and social transformation: a historical link

The first social research arose in Europe concurrently with the industrial revolution and in close connection with the public perception of the “social issue.” Researchers were motivated by the perception of the need to get to know the reality of the impoverished population better, with the goal of taking action through social policies. Two examples can be briefly mentioned here, to bring to mind the link between the technical development of research and the conception of public social policies: the *social surveys* in England between 1830 and 1850, and the surveys of the Association for Social Policies in Germany, in 1873.

With gradual improvement of statistics, it did not take long before attempts arose to use them to gain more precise knowledge of social realities. As in the 1830s, a period in which the English industrial revolution made great advances, two currents in that country were dedicated to empirical social research. On the one side there was the private sector, especially business people, who formed research associations. They were generally humanists motivated by an impetus for social reforms that would avoid the growth of the incipient socialist movement. They saw education as being the main route through which to improve the living conditions of the population and, correspondingly, they concerned themselves in their research to study this facet of social reality. The reality of the world of work was practically not an object of study. The strong ideological connection of this research and its role in subsidizing the formulation of policies that would avoid the growth of social movements make it an example of political instrumentalization.

The other current, connected with the activities of the administrative organs and English parliament, occupied itself in a more objective and differentiated way with the concrete situation of the population, especially the working class, and produced an important collection of informative material. Its

activists carried out interviews, established informal conversations, analyzed documentary sources such as registers and police reports, and even carried out observations *in loco*. One could say that they gave birth to participant observation. Knowledge gathered in this way provided resources for the English social legislation.

The material produced by these two currents which were the birthing sources for social research was the basis of information that Engels used to write his book *The situation of the working class in England* and that Marx used to write *The Capital*, especially for the first volume.

Some decades later, when the industrial revolution and the social transformations that were overlapped within it began to take shape in Germany, social research received a great impulse there also. In 1873 the Association for Social Research was created. This was an association of intellectuals and autonomous professionals, which had the strong support of women from the economically privileged sectors, all very sensitive to the negative effects of the social changes synthesized in the formula of the “social issue”. Its research activities came to a high point between 1873 and 1903, covering the whole period of Bismarck’s implantation of the social security system. Initially, this research was linked in an explicit way to the English antecedents, but it acquired methodological autonomy especially with the adhesion of a new generation of intellectuals, among them Max and Alfred Weber.

Aside from the technical qualification of this research, there are two important innovations that must be pointed out: on the one side, research starts being made “also from the perspective of the hungry” (Brentano, apud Kern 1982). On the other side, there begins an intense activity of political pressure organized by civil society on the government leaders, founded on scientific research results, demanding social policies that were defined as being the main task of the State and the nation.

In the United States, at the beginning of the twentieth century, we have the theoretical-methodological approaches of symbolic interactionism, through the research such as of Blumer (who coined this term) that, according to Annette Triebel (1995), originated from experiences in movements for the improvement of the quality of life. These caused the researchers in that country to become strongly involved. John Dewey, an educator committed to

workers' causes and to the cause of public education, was a pioneer among those who contributed in this issue.

While this was happening, voices were arising in Latin America that clamored for a "science" that was "ours". No one interprets this quest better than José Martí who, in *Nossa América* (Our America) (1891) presents his utopia of an American university: "The people rise up and greet each other. "How are we?" they ask each other; and one or another tells how they are. When a problem arises in Cojimar they do not go immediately seeking a solution in Dantzig" (Martí 1983, 199). As tragic and inefficient as importing solutions is, for Martí, the distance that separates togas from sandals, the élites that create a science of the few and for the few who are occupied with the problems on the other side of the ocean from the people who are left to rot in their own misfortunes. Besides this, "the history of America, from the Incas to now, needs to be taught in detail, even if one does not teach the history of the archons of Greece. Our Greece is preferable to a Greece that is not ours" (Martí 1983, 197).

In this same spirit, Manoel Bonfim publishes, in 1905, the book *A América Latina – males de origem* (Latin America – evils from its origins). According to Darcy Ribeiro, this Brazilian, born in Sergipe, writes "with indignation, this book of protest and denouncement against the prejudiced and advantage seeking view that the Europeans have of the Latin Americans" (Ribeiro 1993, 11).

José Martí and Manoel Bonfim, and other people whose contributions have not yet been adequately assessed, attempt to comprehend and talk of this soul of the people in a different way already during the 19th century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Chiquinha Gonzaga as she popularized the guitar, the "choro" and at the same time defended the slaves and the republic, is a citizen that points to a dream of a free and autonomous Latin America. The new fact in the decade of the sixties of the twentieth century, generally associated in its origin with Latin America, is the protagonism of the sectors of society that were until then objects of research, not only in the social processes but also in the generating of knowledge. Paulo Freire does not write a pedagogy *for the* oppressed, but a pedagogy *of the* oppressed. It is

in the entanglement of the teaching and learning in their life that the science of another way of educating is constituted, if we may call it thus.

The Theology of Liberation, through its method of “see-judge-act” has been creating an agenda of participation of the people in the workers’ circles and in the cultural and popular education movements that ended up interfering in the way knowledge was produced, especially in the fields of theology and education. Even though, today, these constructions are no longer much present, they were decisive in laying the groundwork for many of the concrete actions in academia as well as in the social movements, giving rise to a great part of the current political leaders of Brazil and of Latin America.

As of the decade of the sixties, in a more transnational way, the feminist movement has claimed a different posture with regards to the epistemological process³ within the academic spaces. Proposals such as feminist hermeneutics, where suspicion constitutes one of the steps for the rereading of classical texts, have been incorporated into the social sciences ranging from the scientific field to the theological and philosophical fields, reinstating the women's debate of the nineteenth century onto the northern axis, that is, participation in the public world.⁴ The debate in the academic field demanded different forms of carrying out and presenting the research projects. Francine Descarries (1994) strove for a debate on the characteristic ways of the feminine world and their presence in research practice. That is, life experiences from the feminine world that are generally frowned upon, such as feelings and the informalities of daily life, should be regarded by academia as types of knowledge. Thus, initially through feminist anthropologists, then through women historians and sociologists, we begin to have theses and research projects that will examine local narrative fields and will point to diverse cultural constructions. What is today called cultural studies has its origins in good measure, in the feminist experience of provoking academia with its multiple ways of thinking, based on women's experience of the world.

As we know, upon recognizing “the plurality of logics and argumentative approaches” (Thiollent 1996, 28) and appropriating a space for the participa-

³ On transnational feminism cf. Costa (2000), Alvarez (2000), Thayer (2001).

⁴ See especially Joan Scott's argument. *Cidadã paradoxal*.

tion of the people's sectors in the creation of knowledge, for and within the transformation of their living conditions (Brandão 1986; Gajardo 1986), participatory research anticipated themes, through its practice, that carried the epistemological and methodological discussion to new levels of reflection and, above all, revealed new questions. On the other hand, it is interesting to note also that certain cross sections have not (yet) happened and this constitutes a challenge for research that is committed to social change. This is the case, as seen above, of the approximation of participatory research with feminist research. A similar argument can be made about the relation between participatory research and black or indigenous research, where we also find particular modes of knowledge production.

Research in contexts of mobilizations

Today, participatory research, or some type of research associated with it, is incorporated in a series of social practices. Perhaps, with this, there has occurred an inevitable institutionalization of the movement, identified by Gajardo (1986, 11) as one of the focal points of participatory research, having been included within the criteria and formats of qualitative research. On the other hand, it seems that participatory research is able to develop within the dialectics of the instituted and the instituter,⁵ because of the diversity of the themes that are participatively investigated as well as by reason of the investigative procedures.

If we look at the origins, within the confluence of the educational source with Paulo Freire or the sociological source with Orlando Fals Borba, we can observe that there was an attempt to seek research alternatives for the construction of an alternative society. It was the time of the People's Cultural Movement, the Base Ecclesiastical Communities and so many other movements that came together in grass root education. Juan Luís Segundo was saying then that there could be no theology of liberation without the liberation of theology. Later, Enrique Dussel would pronounce the same diagnosis for the possibility of a philosophy of liberation. Participatory research corresponded

⁵ On the movement between the instituted and the instituter cf. Barbier (1985, 134).

to this political-epistemological set of ideas on the liberation of social science itself.

Today we find participatory research being used in various social practices, generally with the presupposition of empowering the protagonists, but not always within a transforming perspective of the whole. Maybe it is the expression of a time of scarce utopias, where inclusion, even if subordinated, is considered the greatest and only accomplishment possible.

On the other hand, the application of the principles of participatory research in experiences on a macro level, barely imaginable some decades past, is also occurring. This is the case of the Participative Budget, in which investigation, training and administration is combined in a creative and innovative way. The procedures for consulting, beginning with the municipal and regional assemblies, to the finalization of the proposal for the budget by the Council for Participative Budget, constitute a complex process of getting to know the reality in which the people are at the same time trained and feel themselves heard in matters of public administration. One learns about the regional reality, one practices the production of consensus and, above all, the people learn to have their say in a public space.

An important fact is that the promoter of the process is the State, not the social movements nor academia. Through governmental initiative, the state apparatus is put into movement in the construction of the knowledge of the reality in seeking the priorities for intervention. The social movements and the existing communities can sustain the process and guarantee its development, but they do not have the capacity to convoke and promote an action in the public administration sphere. As to academia, it has the role of accompanying a process in which it is not the central protagonist. In the case of the budget planning of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, any research project will be too small to embrace the quantity and quality of information produced or knowledge generated.

Research, in this case, is seen as a catalyzing force in the quest, through various protagonists, for a knowledge that transforms. They research the farmers who seek to know the nature of the land they cultivate and elaborate development projects; they research the administrators who go out to hear the demands; they research the academics who, in various areas, place them-

selves “together with” the movement. This being together does not mean lack of conflicts; on the contrary, it demands that they be made explicit so that the dynamics of knowledge in movement is not lost.

Research as mediation in the relation theory-practice

Linking the generation of knowledge through science to social sciences has concerned philosophers for a long time as a theoretical issue. In the Marxist tradition, however, it became programmatic. The movements that want to carry out such a connection in their quotidian end up being confronted with the question, as an issue of practical reason, of how mediation between theory and practice takes place.

Habermas (1993) proposes that a distinction be made between the three functions that overlap in social sciences: a) formulation and development of theorems that are capable of resisting the critical and systematic discourse of the scientific community; b) organization of enlightenment (awareness raising) processes through which these theorems can be appropriated reflexively and validated by certain groups; and c) choosing adequate strategies and solving tactical issues in conducting political struggles.

As social research is inserted in the world of science, it needs to fulfill certain rules and demands that are peculiar to this function, whose purpose is to produce truthful pronouncements. The central part of these demands is the use of the most adequate methodologies and techniques possible for the case. It is hoped that the theory that is thus produced may serve to clarify for its receivers the position that they assume in a conflictive social system and the interests that can be assumed therein.

As these offers of interpretation of reality are actually recognized by the receivers as being pertinent to their situation, the analytical interpretations become awareness, the interests objectively connected to the social position become the interests of a certain social group.⁶ It is in this way that social research participates in processes of “enlightenment”. In its origins, there was a concern on the part of those responsible for defining social policies, for get-

⁶ This passage was described by Marx as the passage of consciousness in itself to consciousness for itself.

ting to know the social reality “as it really was”; that is, the leading social groups viewed the “scientific” knowledge as the way of overcoming the insufficient or distorted knowledge that would put at risk the effectiveness of their policies. Even though this strategic, sometimes technocratic, goal of social sciences has not disappeared, currently the insertion of research presents itself also with claims to “awareness raising”, to fomenting “learning processes” etc. Habermas, in this context, raises the issue as to what extent these processes are asymmetrical, which would demand similar cautions as are necessary in the therapeutic processes.

Finally, research in the contexts of social transformation interfaces with political struggles, in which tactical and strategic calculations in the search for prudent decisions are of fundamental importance. Social research has a relation of interactivity with political struggle as it, on the one hand, can affect the legitimacy of the claims of the participants and, on the other hand, the access to information depends in part, on the calculations of these same participants. Neither committed involvement nor the claim to neutrality can free it from this risk.

In carrying out the first function of those pointed out by Habermas, science can restrict to a minimum, its interaction with the social groups about which it is trying to formulate truthful enunciations: it can reduce them to an object of its reflection. With techniques such as participant observation or the hidden researcher, this interaction increases, even though there is still the intention of the least possible interference in the routines of the object researched. The researchers seek to reserve for themselves the exclusive competency of this function, while the other functions are considered as happening apart from it, temporally later and of the competency of the other social agents. They consider that the decisions related to the political struggle, especially their consequences, cannot be legitimated by theory.

As to the techniques of research in which the researchers take on the condition of participant in the social process being studied, they seek to suspend the distinction between professional researcher and their “objects” of research. It is supposed that, in lesser or greater degree, there will be a coincidence of goals between the researcher and the other participants, a possibility

of partnerships and a partially concomitant occurrence of the fulfillment of the three functions which overlap in the social sciences.

As mentioned above, this present reflection stems from our confrontation with demands from inside a specific social process. Throughout the research on the participative budget planning we were confronted with our different conditions. Sometimes we were seen as outside observers, who came from afar to accompany the activities and who had a research project to carry out. On many occasions we were received as representatives of academia, of the university, from which specific contributions by the different agents were expected. At the same time, as citizens involved politically, we were participating in activities that expressed change in the relationship between government officials and citizens and, above all, in the way that citizens came to perceive themselves and those who governed them.

That is when the perception of the need to reflect specifically on our insertion as researchers in this social process was renewed within us. The role and the place of the researcher is defined by his or her political and academic identification, by his or her way of acting, but also by the expectations of the group. Participatory research, more than any other method, requires this looking on oneself to avoid that the participation end up in co-opting the words and ideas of the protagonists of these social processes that are being researched, or in a discourse from oneself and about oneself.

Issues about the definition of the directions of the social transformation

The social sciences, on some occasions, have been used to legitimize reform projects that are presented as being modernizing. They serve as a type of “social technology”. The culture of consulting services, many times by “imported” specialists, foments to a great degree the separation between those who think and those who should apply this knowledge (Meneses 2004, 721-755). Participation becomes a synonym of acquiescence with the supposedly higher scholarship.

Participatory research puts these claims in check as it radically connects a conception of participatory democracy (all are capable of participating in de-

fining the directions of their society) with a radical democratization of the production of knowledge by relating

- empirical research with the goal of provoking social transformation in the area being studied, that is, getting to know while transforming;
- the passivity of the observer with the activity of the agent. It does not accept the “division of labor” according to which the researcher observes (see, for example, participant observation) while the actors (agents) that are being studied by him/her act. Researcher and actor in participatory research merge (partially) into the same personage; all are observers and all are agents.

Shiv Sisvanathan (apud Santos, 2004, 770), from India, relates that a group of “unnotables” (tribes that in the past were classified as criminals by the British) came to the researcher to talk about health policies. They wanted, said the researcher, not only participation, but *presence*, of two types: they requested that their knowledge of health and sickness be taken into consideration and there be a plurality of ways of observing derived from the encounter of these protagonists, who are at the same time agents of change and promoters of knowledge. That is, participatory research does not play itself out with the end of a project or the fulfillment of an action, but incorporates itself as *investigative presence* in the life of the community.

This places three issues (in some ways conflicting) or dilemmas before participatory research:

- a) the “truth”, the “knowledge” sought by the research becomes, in fact, practical; it has as its main goal the work on a problem placed by the social context and not the goal to fill lacunas pointed out by the scientific community;
- b) this relativizes the link between “knowledge” and reality; it no longer needs to be necessarily a faithful representation of a reality (which was the great claim of science), only adequate for it (reality);
- c) research as interface in the political struggle and research as a professional activity that has in the scientific community its social control are attempts to “serve two lords” – and very zealous lords. The researcher sees her/himself placed before the challenge of needing to communicate in different

languages, depending on the public with which he or she is dialoguing. This is not about putting into contempt his or her intellectual capacity, but about the learning of the possibilities of transiting between distinct bodies of knowledge.

These tensions can be more easily apprehended as part of the research if we understand it as an action or as a public space (Bauer/Gaskell 2002, 481). Seen as an eminently public endeavor, requirements are made for accountability that go beyond the academic report. The relevance will also be measured by its communicative capacity which will permit the validation and the legitimization of the results and of the process.

Following, we mention how, in the research on the Participative Budget we tried to come to terms with these challenges or tensions:

- The attempt was made to maintain a broad base of dialogue, with the various sectors that were involved: government, local politicians, coordinators, councilors, men, women, young people that participated in the assemblies. The data collection did not end with the application of a questionnaire or a round of interviews. This sharing materialized in a database that we maintain in the collection on the Participative Budget, at UNISINOS, and that makes re-readings possible through the vast audio-visual documentation and other primary source documents. The mutual reflection of the multiple protagonists can be pointed out as being one of the ingredients and challenges of participatory research. The consultation of those who sought data to work out the budget as well as ours with the intent of comprehending the process, was an intervention in the routine of the communities. But it was also an intervention in “our” world. Research that is understood as participatory, does not leave the worlds as they are.
- The geographical displacement to carry out the research seminars with the communities also represented epistemological displacements. The body of knowledge produced acquired other features and dimensions when explained in other languages. The use of images (photos and videos) is an

important instrument for the continuity of the exercise of reading and pronouncing the world through codification and decodification.⁷

- The movement of meeting people, listening to them and later talking about this experience was very constructive within the space of the research group. Not keeping the information reserved to oneself, wanting to know what the other perceived, how the other understood certain expressions and situations, obliges those who do group research to reconstruct the trajectory of the field researched in a collective way. And more: it makes it possible to observe how those who do research with the support of scholarship recipients are pushed to create new spaces for debate, because, if at first it is we, professors, who instigate the act of researching, soon it is the scholarship recipients that set up other spaces of creation around the theme. This happened with initiatives of scholarship recipients who organized research forums and also with the participation of others in the writing of texts that elaborated concepts based on readings, and with this, advance in their careers *solo*. Confirming the precious process of learning that knowledge fascinates, generating scholarship and flavor.

The participation in the context and in the social practices that are researched does not cause the disappearance of the academic space as such, and it would not be our intention to subtract the result of our research from its criteria. But it presents itself as one among other transit spaces. Whoever has researched through the academic experience can contribute to education from another point of view, based on the citizen mobilized in participative processes or on the part of people representing the public power. From them they can learn to reeducate their own perspective. In this exchange it is possible to see how the participation of various protagonists in the world of research represents the constitution of new horizons and how much the critical look from “outside” can help in the scientific field.

The academic space is reinvented, and with this the posture of the one who researches also changes when confronted with the object to be researched. The role of science to formulate true pronouncements, within the

⁷ Concepts used by Paulo Freire in his work of surveying the vocabulary universe for literacy training.

interaction with the groups, becomes inscribed in a temporary role of announcing truths that are also temporary.

In words that are precious in the tradition of participatory research, we can say that the latter occurs through a movement in which cultural exchange, sharing and negotiation complement each other. Exchange suggests reciprocity, a predisposition to give and receive. Sharing indicates the gratuity within a relationship in which the reciprocity is in the act itself of sharing what one has. Negotiation, on the other hand, points to the fact that our actions are necessarily interlaced with power relationships. Participatory research is a little of each. And in this “little of each” is everything, because that generates movement.

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